



CHARLES DICKENS' GREAT EXPECTATIONS AND DONNA TARTT'S THE GOLDFINCH: A STUDY IN BILDUNGSROMAN

Adhavapriya S¹ | Dr. Marie Josephine Aruna²

¹ Undesignated.

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kanchi Mamunivar Centre for Postgraduate Studies, Puducherry, India - 605008.

ABSTRACT

The concept of bildungsroman is studied in the novels *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens and *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt by integrating the experiences of the protagonists. Their character growths follow a similar arc as they start off as naive young boys and evolve into well experienced men. The struggles they face from a young age, and the way they deal with the problems of life, the choices they make and the beliefs they hold are examined. The characters they come across and the role they play in the development of the lives of the protagonists are also compared and contrasted.

KEYWORDS: Great Expectations, The Goldfinch, bildungsroman, development novels.

INTRODUCTION:

The "I have been bent and broken, but - I hope - into a better shape" (Dickens 442). Life may throw infinite challenges, but the way someone deals with those twists and turns define who they are. The pain and sufferings they face only serve to shape and mould them for the better. Bildungsroman is a narrative technique that traces the gradual maturation of the protagonist in a large time span. The growth of the character is very much dependent upon the choices that are made. Any character that doesn't undergo changes, and grow as a result of undergoing those changes, cannot be called a fully matured character. One of the best examples of a bildungsroman novel is Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, wherein the protagonist gains wisdom by undergoing a spiritual journey. An example of a bildungsroman novel with a female protagonist is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

This paper intends to do a comparative study of the lives of the protagonists of two texts, *Great Expectations* by the Victorian novelist Charles Dickens and *The Goldfinch* by American novelist Donna Tartt. Both the texts fit into the genre of bildungsroman narrative, progress through similar aspects such as tragedy, class distinctions, crime and debauchery, unrequited love, restitution and reformation.

The Benevolent Orphan: The Journey of Pip in Dickens' *Great Expectations*

Great Expectations is Charles Dickens' thirteenth novel. Dickens wrote about the social discriminations and evils that prevailed in the Victorian society, and how his characters fell prey to them. This novel is a bildungsroman narrative that focuses on the growth and development of an orphan in England. The novel opens with Pip, the protagonist, visiting his parents' graveyard where he encounters a convict named Abel Magwitch, whom he, out of fear, helps escape from the police.

He falls in love with the cold hearted Estella who does not reciprocate his love. Soon he comes across an anonymous great expectation that helps turn him into a gentleman and find his place in the society. Wealth makes him a vainglorious man and he fails to see things rationally. He associates himself with shallow principles and thus hurts those who are close to him and care about him deeply. But he finally makes sense of things when he reencounters a man he never thought he'd meet again, finally repenting for all his mistakes.

Lost Soul, Unrequited Love: The Journey of Theo in Tartt's *The Goldfinch*

The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt, her first published book after a gap of eleven years, is a bildungsroman novel that follows the life of Theo Decker. He survives a terrorist bombing at a museum when he is thirteen, but loses his mother. After losing his beloved mother in the bombing and left homeless, he goes to live in his schoolmate's wealthy Park Avenue house. He later reunites with his distant and absent father in Las Vegas, where he meets Boris, his best friend and accomplice in all his crimes. Theo self destructs himself by leading a life of crime, debauchery and drugs. He falls in love with Pippa, the girl he meets at the Art Museum right before it was bombed, but she doesn't love him back. He makes mistakes, commits fraudulent acts, feels lost to the world. Still in the end he finally pulls himself together and makes amends for all his sins.

Boys of Suffering: Analysis of *Great Expectations* and *The Goldfinch* as Bildungsroman novels

To compare is an inbuilt inclination of man. This quality of his to establish a correspondence between individual objects or concepts gave birth to the discipline of Comparative Literature. German scholar Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, with his notion of *Weltliteratur*, laid the foundation for this field of study. Though any

different forms of art can be compared, it is important for there to be some basis for comparison. There is a need for "A strong number of similarities, which allow us to isolate particular striking, revealing, informing, epiphanic and ultimately untranslatable differences" (Reid 69). Elaine Martin says that Comparative literature can be inspiring to the discipline of humanities. "The dynamic nature of this discipline — a discipline that importantly rejects the division of knowledge into "disciplines" has contributed to its continued vitality and its ability to metamorphose, along with the larger culture within which it exists, into new and provocative forms... Comparative literature has a potentially unique role to play in the humanities as a natural locus for new, restructured paradigms of knowledge" (Martin).

Both the novels mentioned above fall under the category of bildungsroman narrative. Exploring the metaphorical journeys undertaken by the protagonists in order to reach their emotional maturities bring in the conclusion that the various trials the heroes face in both the novels are homogenous in nature. The settings of the selected works are, in the case of *Great Expectations*, the England that is on the cusp of Industrialisation and Colonisation, and in *The Goldfinch*, the America that has surely established itself as a superpower. The protagonists are thus placed under very powerful and influential environments that either help or hinder their progress in lives.

Pip in *Great Expectations* is an orphan who has lost both his parents at the onset of the novel. "I never saw my father, or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like were unreasonably derived from their tombstones" (Dickens 5). Theo in *The Goldfinch* also loses his mother at the beginning of the novel. His father, though alive, is as good as dead to him since he has already abandoned his family, and later when he reappears in Theo's life it is only as a matter of convenience that he brings in Theo to stay with him and his girlfriend. Soon he dies as well. This makes both the protagonists orphans who are left to their own devices to survive the challenges of the world.

Pip grows up with his sister, Mrs. Joe and her blacksmith husband, Joe Gargery. They are the only parental figures in Pip's life. Though she is his sister, Mrs. Joe is abusive towards Pip. On the contrary, Joe, who is not related to Pip by blood, is the one who cares for him. They share a very unique bond made of friendship and paternal affection that is at times not reciprocated by Pip as he grows old.

Theo in *The Goldfinch* has his mother who he shares a very special bond with. He finds it difficult to live life the same way after her death. She is his companion and role model in a way Joe is to Pip in *Great Expectations*. Though his father never physically abuses Theo, he is still an absentee father figure who drinks too much and is a gamble addict. The roles are thus reversed in the stories. The mother figure in Pip's life doesn't care about him but her husband, Joe, does. Theo's father does not care about him but his mother does.

The defining moment of Pip's life in *Great Expectations* happens when he visits his parents' graveyard as a seven year old. He sees an escaped convict looking very dirty and starving. The man threatens to kill Pip if he doesn't bring him some food to fill his starving stomach and a metal file to cut his leg chain. Pip, in a state of terror, does as he is asked and ends up saving the convict. This act of kindness prompts the convict to try to pay it back.

In Theo's life, this defining moment happens as he is visiting the Metropolitan

Museum of Art with his mother. There, he loses his mother in a terrorist bombing. Amidst the chaos, he gains consciousness and sees an old man dying next to him. Theo helps the man drink some water. The old man, nearing his death, deliriously hands over a ring to Theo and urges him to steal the painting of a goldfinch lying amid the debris. Theo, in his traumatised state, does as he is asked. The stolen painting later represents a deeper meaning to Theo.

Theo and Pip's important turns in life occurs at the site of their dead parent(s). It is the graveyard for Pip. And for Theo it is the museum, which is a symbol of all things frozen in time or in other words, dead, and his mother's corpse lying somewhere near. They both commit acts of kindness, that are incentives for something greater in life, at a young age - Pip helping Magwitch and Theo helping the dying Welly.

When Pip in *Great Expectations* goes to the Satis House, it turns a new page in his book. The house is described to be dark with low lit candles, structurally in ruins and uncared for. Relatives who do not care about Miss Havisham, the owner of the mansion, come to visit her in order to win her favour and inherit her wealth once she passes away. Miss Havisham, jilted on her wedding day, lives life captive in her wedding gown and seeks to exact revenge upon all men by breaking their hearts.

Theo goes on to live with the Barbours as he is about to be placed in foster care by the child protection services after his mother's death. The Barbours live a sophisticated life style. Their house is in Park Avenue on the Upper East Side of New York. It is always dimly lit. They host hushed parties that is reserved only for the elites. Mrs. Barbour is a woman of perfect composure, while Mr. Barbour is a man who is not mentally healthy. Though they welcome Theo into their home and later even try to adopt him, it is not expressed freely whether they love him or not. The Barbours and Miss Havisham's residences are both quite gloomy and haunting in appearance, which foreshadow something darker in the lives of the protagonists.

Estella, Pip's love interest, is the convict's daughter and Miss Havisham's adoptive daughter. Pip's love for Estella is of the perpetual kind, as Miss Havisham advises him, he does love Estella beyond time; "If she favours you, love her. If she wounds you, love her. If she tears your heart to pieces,—and as it gets older and stronger, it will tear deeper,—love her, love her, love her" (Dickens 220). Estella may not love him back, but even her rejection doesn't stop him. Biddy is another potential love interest for Pip. She loves him knowing he can never love anyone other than Estella.

Pippa, Theo's love interest, is under the care of the old man he helped at the site of bombing. Theo's love for Pippa is also of the perpetual kind, try as he might, he cannot get rid of his love for her. Kitsey, whom he dates and even gets engaged to, is not the woman his heart desires. But he acknowledges that his mother would have loved for them to be together: "She would have loved you too, and would have loved for us to be together. I'm sorry it didn't work out" (Tartt 718).

Pip works for his brother-in-law at the forge and learns all about how to be a blacksmith. He doesn't get paid, so he resents the time he spends there. All he wants is to become a gentleman so that he can be worthy of Estella. It is as he gets settled into this new way of life that his opportunity to become a gentleman presents itself. This change of setting causes major consequences in the life of Pip. It is responsible for morally corrupting him. As Pip leaves the Kent Marshes for London, he leaves Joe and Estella behind.

Theo goes to the antique furniture restoration store owned now by Hobie. He sees Pippa there, physically and emotionally recovering from the blast and undergoing treatments. He also learns the tricks of the trade of furniture restoration, on how to bring back an old piece of furniture or art into life and make it new, from Hobie. It is then that his father reappears and takes Theo to Las Vegas. In a way, this has the same effect as Pip's great expectation does, it provides opportunities for Theo to become a drug addict and a petty thief. As Theo leaves life in New York behind, he loses Hobie and Pippa.

Life in London is very different for Pip. Moonlit skies and graveyards are what he is used to. But London is a buzz of activity. The bright lights of the city and the Newgate prison replace the country metaphors. Theo too finds life so different in Las Vegas. It is as they leave to a new setting that both Pip and Theo encounter their confidants. Pip meets Herbert and Theo meets Boris. There is familiarity when Pip and Herbert meet because they both had already crossed paths in the past when Pip was a young boy. That previously established connection helps them build their friendship on. Similarly, Theo sees Boris and the connection they feel is not of past encounters but an instantly recognisable mutual pain over the fact that they are two lost souls longing for some sort of acknowledgement for their existence from the people who are supposed to love them the most in the world. Theo is fascinated by the lively personality of Boris. He is larger than life, wise, makes people happy with just his presence and he shows Theo around Las Vegas. Together, they explore the city and experience everything it has to offer to boys their age, and sometimes going overboard and experiencing things that are not meant for them too.

As Pip in *Great Expectations* and Theo in *The Goldfinch* find companionship

with Herbert and Boris respectively, they also associate themselves with debauchery and shallowness. Pip becomes a proud man as he undertakes his training to become a polished person, loses his country accent, learns general manners and courtesy, goes to rich parties, has dinner with actresses, spends money lavishly and gets into debts. He becomes a vainglorious man through and through. He forgets his humble past and loving family back home. He is not aware of how different he is from the old Pip, but Joe does. When Joe visits Pip in London, he is treated unkindly by Pip. He feels irritation and embarrassment as Joe tries to speak refined English.

Theo falls prey to drug addiction while in Vegas. He uses drugs as a way to numb the pain of loneliness and the chaos in his life. Boris and Theo indulge in petty thefts as a way to cope. Just like Joe was disappointed by the way Pip was living his life in London, Theo's mother would be with him were she alive. As Theo flees Vegas and goes back to New York, he goes to work for Hobie. He cheats Hobie by working behind his back, trying to sell off fraudulent items as genuine antiques. It implies that he has forgotten everything that Hobie had done for Theo, just like Pip has forgotten everything Joe had done for him.

The revelations in Pip's and Theo's lives are similar in terms of their significance. Pip had wanted to become a gentleman all his life. He believed it could make him important, into someone that matters, a person worthy of Estella's heart. When Magwitch, the convict he helped all those years ago, comes back to tell him he had been the force behind Pip realising his dream, his precious dream shatters into pieces. He feels appalled by the information. "The abhorrence in which I held the man, the dread I had of him, the repugnance with which I shrank from him, could not have been exceeded if he had been some terrible beast" (Dickens 293). Theo wanted to hold on to the painting of the goldfinch all his life. It was his consolation, his touchstone, and the last thread that connected him to his mother. When he bumps into Boris later in New York, Theo learns that the painting was stolen from him by Boris himself when they were in high school. The way this news affects Theo is in many ways equal to Pip learning the truth about his secret benefactor. In both instances, their dreams had been far from reality. But with the help of Herbert, Pip tries to send Magwitch off to Australia. In *The Goldfinch*, Boris helps Theo in hunting down the painting. Magwitch is arrested by the police in *Great Expectations*, and the painting is taken into police custody in *The Goldfinch*.

When Pip falls ill, he spends a long time reflecting upon his life choices. As Magwitch dies, all of Pip's arrogance dies as well. Pip may have freed Magwitch when he was seven, but he metaphorically chained himself instead. He becomes a true gentleman only when he lets go of everything he has learnt in London. Joe and Biddy accept him as he repents for his mistakes.

Theo hides in an Amsterdam Hotel room waiting for Boris' arrival. As several days pass, Theo's anticipation intensifies. He reevaluates his past choices, making the decision to give everything up and surrender to the police. Boris arrives just in time and reveals that the goldfinch painting has been restored to the government and shares with him the reward money. When Theo stole the painting all those years ago, the chain in the bird's leg metaphorically transferred to bind him instead, and as the painting finally leaves his possession, he becomes a free man.

CONCLUSION:

Every man is striving towards a goal that is uniquely important to him but in the end all that matters is whether or not he develops as an individual in the process. "True education does not consist merely in the acquiring of a few facts of science, history, or art, but in the development of character" (McKay). Physical growth is natural and happens by itself, provided the body is supplied with enough nourishments, but character growth cannot be made possible without consciously making the right choices. Bildungsroman is the synonym for character growth in literary context. Learning from previous mistakes is the essence of character maturation. The novels are filled with characters that make mistakes and suffer the consequences, and then rise above everything as changed people. The intention of this paper was to do an analysis of two fictional texts as bildungsroman novels. The texts taken for study constitute *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens and *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt. A comparative study was done where the homogeneity and the heterogeneity in the texts were scrutinised to establish them as texts of bildungsroman narrative.

REFERENCES:

1. Brontë, Charlotte. (1847) *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder & Co., London.
2. Dickens, Charles. (2007) *Great Expectations*. Penguin Classics, London.
3. Hesse, Hermann. (1922). *Siddhartha*. Trans. Hilda Rosner. New Directions, United States.
4. Martin, Elaine. (2005). "Ways of knowing: Comparative Literature and the Future of the Humanities" Third International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities.
5. McKay, David O. (1953) *Gospel Ideals: Selections from the Discourses of David O. McKay*. Era Publications.
6. Reid, Gregory J. (2009). "A Prolegomenon to Comparative Drama in Canada: In Defence of Binary Studies." Text & Presentation 2005, Volume 2 of The Comparative Drama Conference Series, edited by Constantinidis, E. Stratos.
7. Tartt, Donna. (2013) *The Goldfinch*. Little, Brown and Company, United States.